

Sword and Spinner: Maps, Flowers... And Lila.

[FX: A small stringed instrument picks its way through notes]

Abigail, as the intro: Sword and Spinner, Episode One: Maps, Flowers, and Lila.

[FX: Cicadas fade in, interspersed, occasionally, by the faint sound of crows.]

For every place Remus had killed a monster within Rhysea, they'd drawn a flower on their map. Lila scoffed every time they did so: the stars would be out, late at night, a campfire small and comforting before them, and as she stumbled through her first compositions of their latest adventure -- more a forlorn picking at notes interspersed with lewd rhymes at Remus's expense than an actual song -- Remus would take their nibbed pen and ink and draw over the place they'd been.

That was the glorious thing, he'd always supposed, about Rhysea -- its flora: flowers bloomed and twisted by night. The cold season, even though it was so long dark, was so much more mild than Illikna, where they'd been born, and though different flowers grew as the weather changed, the long *warm times* fading into the *starlight days*, there were always flowers to pick and press into the Rhysean history book they kept, always flowers to sketch on their map.

"What's going to happen to that map," Lila asked, late one night, in between halting melodies and humming, "when a monster finally gets you?"

Remus hadn't looked up. "I'll draw a grave in the spot it happened."

"You'll be dead."

"Then you will for me, *poitis*."

She laughed, plucked at another few notes. "Bold assumption, *gladicus*."

"I'll haunt you until you do, then." They glanced up from beneath their lashes, just in time to see their bard's face contort for a second, two, and felt a small twinge of pride at getting a reaction from her. He flicked his eyes back down before she could catch him staring.

"Ghosts aren't real. Souls can't haunt other souls, Remus." She'd stumbled over the word, *ghost* -- her Illiknan was better than most of the damned people in this country, who expected all else to speak Rhysean and called Remus's land nothing more than *the Far Shore*, but she was far from perfect. Half the reason Remus let her stick around -- or, at least, what he told himself-- was so that they didn't lose the language of their birth.

But Rhysea didn't conceive death like Illikna did. Souls didn't have a chance to escape, didn't have traditions of *a proper burial or else curses and spirits and ghosts* like they did back home. Here, there was death, and there was the scattering of matter, and there was the becoming something new, something better, so long as the body was returned to the ground. Entropy made the magic they claimed would come back some day: every bit of life-force that disappeared between this existence and the next would return *someday*, they said, when the new Eligida came. It's why their trees seemed so alive. It's why the flowers bloomed at night. Rhysea believed they were the people you used to love, come back to you a little less whole.

Remus thought that was a bunch of shit. They made a mental note to pester the everliving *hell* out of Lila as a spirit, if they died first, just for the pleasure of an *I told you so*.

Ghosts were ghosts were ghosts, not plants or prey or starlight, and Remus half-looked forward to being one.

“For your Rhysea, maybe. But at home --”

“They’re real, I know what you think.” Remus twitched, just slightly, at the emphasis she put on *think*. Lila sighed. Considered. “Do you think that if you died here, you’d -- shit -- *reencontir* into a tree or flower or something? Do you think that once you cross the border, your soul changes forms?”

“No. Your country is just wrong.” Remus hoped so. If they died with a sword through their chest in Rhysea and woke up as a pansy, they’d be pissed as here. They shifted, re-dipped their pen into their inkwell. “Stop bothering me. I’m drawing.”

Lila went back to humming, plucking the *g* on their lute over and over, half-in, half-out of rhythm, before it devolved into something like a tavern song. Remus hadn’t heard it before -- she’d probably pulled it from her head and was twisting their latest victory into it.

Victory – victory, yes, there had been a battle and an argument and a death — but it hadn’t been over a creature. There weren’t *monsters* in Rhysea -- not truly. There was the idea of magic, of course, somewhere deep in the woods — the rumors of a sword buried in a tree in the heart of their King’s castle and the *rex et poeta et soldat* that would return to finally, finally set things right — but most of the things that fell into the realm of *extraordinary*, for better or worse, had disappeared as the years tumbled forward, away from a girl that came from another world and a poet that sang prophecy as they died. No more witches. No more magic. Hardly any monsters. Remus thought the people of Rhysea were foolish for holding on.

What *did* still exist were stories that, as they whispered their way through villages, *became* monsters. Children disappeared into the dark when a harvest failed, and a man on the edge of town got fatter and fatter as the rest of the village turned to bone. Two men were found drowned in the river, and talk of sirens made their way to Remus who, upon arriving, had found nothing but a cracked girl, shaking in her bed, and an older sister with the embers of vengeance in her eyes. *People* were the monsters, these Rhyseans in their hamlets, and Remus's work, inevitably, was not slaying true monsters like they'd found back home, but instead pulling people apart and stitching them back together again. They were a *gladicus* -- literally, in Rhysean, a sword -- but their reputation had become one of a ranger, someone who wandered the parts of the country too far away for the kings to care about to keep the peace, and Lila, dear Lila, spun it into something just.

They were a great team, Remus supposed -- a sword to level justice and a bard to smooth the edges. And their reputation, in the five years since they'd begun, had become something close to a legend itself.

Lila mumbled a pocketful of words that fit halfway into a tune. She stopped strumming, frowned, and tried again with another set.

Remus finished their flowers and drew a small pouch of sand from their pocket -- it hadn't used to be a small pouch, but time and monsters and drawings and drawings and drawings had diminished their supply down to nearly nothing. The sand was from Illnika, from the shore where Remus had grown up listening to the sound of waves. It was a waste of home, they knew, to sprinkle it over their drawings so they'd dry faster -- especially when they knew returning home was an impossibility -- but there was catharsis in it, too. Once the sand was gone, they'd be free.

Or so he hoped. Hoped that it wouldn't hurt to have one less reminder of home. He wanted to cling to it -- so, so badly, when he let himself dream of it late at night -- but there wasn't a point to wishing for things that you couldn't have. Once the sand was gone, he hoped he'd be able to think straight.

Lila strummed a chord, two, three. It formed the beginnings of a song they already knew: the one she sang, most often, as their own personal legend. *Sword and spinner*, she called it. It was ridiculously self-aggrandizing -- Lila wasn't nearly the hero or the artist that song made her out to be -- but the towns loved it.

Which, of course, gave Lila an ego the size of the sea.

Anyone who'd only heard Lila's songs knew just the highly stylized versions of themselves she'd created. In them, Remus was more magnanimous, more selfless and stronger and more muscular, rather annoyingly, than they'd ever been or could see themselves becoming. Lila fell closer to a prophet, closer to a warrior, closer to a detective, the way she painted herself. As if she didn't just tag along and make quips about their jobs.

In the worst towns, they were called *soldat et poeta*. Remus always made sure not to stay in those places for long.

They weren't Rhysean. They didn't believe in the country's ridiculous and impossible prophecies.

Another chord, a half-hummed, half-sung verse of *Sword and Spinner*. This meant she was having an *artistic block*. Remus rolled their eyes. "We're leaving in the morning. Heading back towards the shore. Someone in the village mentioned child-snatchers and angry forests towards the north -- *don't say it's magic.*"

Lila closed her mouth, gave them a forlorn look. "It's a *possibility.*"

"You say that every time. And all we've found are people doing monstrous things."

"Still." A plucked line of *sword and spinner*. "Speaking of the village --"

Remus groaned internally.

--Why wouldn't you let us stay? Just for the night. We could've had *beds* in a *tavern* and *mead* and *company* -"

"That's never the deal," he said, and ignored the way she said *company* as a synonym for *pleasure*. "We took their coin and their thanks. Staying would have meant favors and debts — neither of which we can afford here, not if we want to stay honest —"

She made a face. "But *Remus* --"

"*Lila*."

She stopped. "Fine."

The truth was, they would've stayed, just for the night. The people were kind and the innkeeper had offered them rooms, but there had been whispers of *soldat et poeta* at the edges of every room they were in, and that made Remus jumpy. They didn't trust anyone who believed in idols. Prophecies were for the desperate. Prophecies that idolized divine rule were for the dumb.

"The next village," they promised.

"You always say that."

Remus brushed the sand from the pages of his book, trying to ignore the twinge in his heart, and shrugged. "No one's forcing you to tag along."

"*Tag along?*" Lila said, scandalized. "*Tag along?* What would you do without me? What would you be, dear Remus?"

“Calmer, probably. I’d have less gray hair. And fewer stab wounds, because I wouldn’t have you to worry about.”

She sat back, smug. “So you *do* worry about me.”

Remus gritted their teeth. “As I worry about everyone in this godsforsaken country. You’re not special.”

“Suuuuure.”

Remus slammed his book shut and pulled their hood up over their head. “You’re on first watch,” they said, closing their eyes. “I can’t deal with you right now.”

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[FX: A small stringed instrument picks its way through notes. The cicadas stop. Chloe, as Lila, begins to sing.]

Mighty sword and spinner fair

Tread the land with graceful air

Slaying monsters as they go

They’re the heroes lips should know

The sword he

Fights with precision

Never derision

He completes his mission

The spinner sings the prose

Of their triumphs how they rose

And everywhere the spinner goes

Mead and melody will flow

Mighty sword and spinner fair

Tread the land with graceful air

Slaying monsters as they go

They're the heroes lips should know

From distant lands they've hailed

Deep and wild seas they've sailed

In their battles they won't fail

For they've found their holy grail

In unity of two

Spinner and sword fight through and through

Always knowing what to do

So when you're lost you call on who?

Well the

Mighty sword and spinner fair

Tread the land with graceful air

Slaying monsters as they go

They're the heroes lips should know

Oooh [**Chloe sings a sick lil interlude**]

Mighty sword and spinner fair

Tread with graceful air

Slaying monsters as they go

They're the heroes lips should know

The Mighty sword and spinner fair

We tread the land with graceful air

Slaying monsters as we go

We're the heroes lips should know

We're the heroes lips should know

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[**The outro, an instrumental version of Sword and Spinner, begins to play**]

Abigail: Sword and Spinner is written and edited by me, Abigail Eliza.

Chloe: The music was written, sung, and edited by me, Chloe Peterson.

Abigail: The voice of Remus was Abigail Eliza.

Chloe: And the voice of Lila was Chloe Peterson.

Abigail: If you'd like to hear more about Sword and Spinner or other stories in Rhysea, you can check us out on twitter, instagram, or tumblr @Backagainpodcast or @Abigailelizawrites on Tik Tok.

Chloe: If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are.

Abigail: There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. I hope you have a wonderful day.